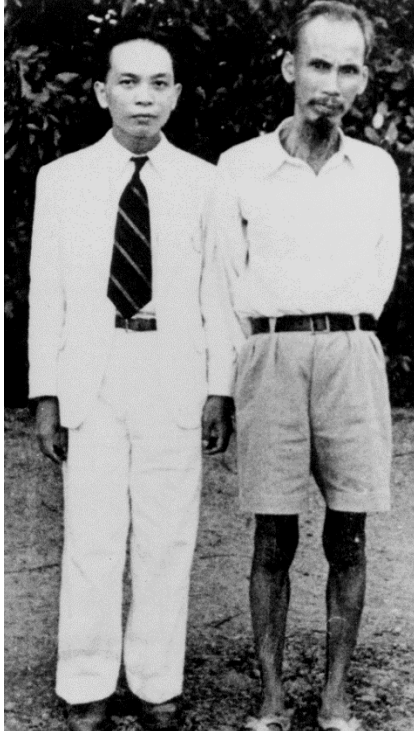


Dien Bien Phu May 7

How do you know when your intelligence is good enough? Case in point: Dien



Vo Nguyen Giap and Ho Chi Minh

Bien Phu. The spring 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu was one of the great battles of the last century. France had been struggling to retain control of Vietnam since 1946 against Vietnamese nationalist forces, the Viet Minh, headed by Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap. French generals came to believe that if they could engage these rebels in a major battle, they would destroy the enemy, effectively ending their revolt. An overconfident France even picked the location for this battle—Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam. The rebels obliged.

Why was France so confident? French COMINT operatives had been increasingly successful with their communications intercept efforts and were proud of their ability to analyze Viet Minh

communications. They had repeatedly assured their commanders that there was little chance of being surprised by a strong enemy force. In light of this, French generals firmly believed that they would know everything that they needed to know about their opposing forces. This would allow them to stay two steps ahead of General Giap, the main enemy strategist. Why did they think this?

In a single word, COMINT. The French had broken both the operational and logistical Viet Minh encryption codes. In fact, as early as 1946, the French had already identified some of the Viet Minh networks and were performing analysis on their findings. In particular, the French were very good at radio direction finding (RDF). They were able to easily and efficiently follow large movements of enemy troops by tracking their radio communications. They also employed mobile RDF units, making tracking even more accurate. As early as 1948, the French were even performing ARDF (airborne radio direction finding). This involved outfitting

French aircraft with RDF equipment. The results were extraordinary, particularly in detecting large troop movements.*

The French moved units to Dien Bien Phu, a mountainous region, ostensibly for sweep operations in the area, but actually to set up a target they believed the Viet Minh would be eager to confront in a conventional set-piece battle. However, the Viet Minh, in a great effort, laid siege to the base and eventually, in early May 1954, prevailed in the fight.

Dien Bien Phu, fought March-May 1954, was a major defeat for the French. Shortly thereafter, they gave up their holdings in Southeast Asia (to include Cambodia and Laos) at the Geneva Conference. The United States soon would replace the French in Vietnam, beginning an active involvement that would last a couple of decades. Why did the French lose at Dien Bien Phu? In early 1954, the French simply overestimated their own abilities and underestimated the enemy's ability to move its forces in almost every area. As a result, French commanders allowed their forces to be trapped in an indefensible position, a base so remote that it could not be relieved or effectively resupplied during the Viet Minh's two month siege.

Tellingly, the French had experienced intelligence gaps before that had hurt them against Giap's forces, especially early on. By relying too much on one source of intelligence—Viet Minh use of conventional communications like radio—they placed themselves at a disadvantage once the Viet Minh changed a code or went to radio silence.

* ARDF was considered to be an American success story in Vietnam — but the French did it first.

SOURCE: *Unlikely Warriors* by Lonnie Long and Gary Blackburn

502 Caption: General Giap and Ho Chi Minh standing in a pose for the camera.